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DE RUEHBS #0819/01 1511524  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 301524Z MAY 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7512  
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1756  
RUEHKI/AMEMBASSY KINSHASA PRIORITY 0470  
RUEHJB/AMEMBASSY BUJUMBURA 0015  
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 0228  
RUEHLGB/AMEMBASSY KIGALI 0387  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2112  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0241

C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 000819

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/30/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [DRC](#) [CH](#) [BE](#)  
SUBJECT: BELGIUM DIPLOMATS IN DISARRAY OVER CONGO

REF: A. BRUSSELS 719  
[1](#)B. KINSHASA 465

Classified By: POLCOUNS LGURIAN for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Diplomatic relations between Belgium and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are at a low point as Congolese officials reacted negatively to recent public comments Belgian Foreign Minister Karel de Gucht made regarding poor governance, lack of transparency, corruption and disrespect for human rights in the Congo. These statements reiterate the broad criticisms de Gucht raised while on a trip to the DRC April 16-23 (ref a). De Gucht claims he gave the same message privately to Congolese President Kabila during the trip. The Congolese closed their consulate in Antwerp and recalled their ambassador from Brussels, although the closure and recall may be for other, unrelated reasons. The Congolese government ordered the Belgians to close their consulates in Bukavu and Lubumbashi, though Belgian officials continue to operate their consulates. Prime Minister Yves Leterme reportedly expressed doubts about his foreign minister's diplomacy style, while supporting his message. Leterme publicly expressed the hope relations between Belgium and the Congo will soon return to normal as he tries to reach President Kabila by phone. He may suggest to Kabila sending a special envoy to work out their differences. It will be a test of Leterme's diplomatic skills to deal with Kabila in such a way as to move forward in their relations without damaging his domestic image. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Jozef Smets, MFA Africa expert and Great Lakes Contact Group envoy, was open and frank about the current crisis in Belgian/Congolese relations and the resulting fallout within the Belgian government. Smets told poloff he was not surprised by the backlash reaction from the Congo. Smets was on the trip with de Gucht; he said their meeting with President Kabila in which de Gucht talked about evidence of corruption, human rights issues, and the lack of good governance and transparency in government and finance and economics, did not go well. De Gucht was particularly concerned about the Congolese failure to renew the mandate for UN experts on human rights in the Congo and about their assertion that human rights were no longer problematic. Smets noted de Gucht had visited the Congo numerous times and given Kabila similar, though discreet, messages of concern but, seeing no changes, de Gucht had decided to go public with tough messages for the government.

[1](#)3. (C) The first conversations were publicized in the Congo and news reports made it appear de Gucht humiliated Kabila. Although Smets says there is a general consensus here that de

Gucht's message is correct, e.g., there is corruption in high places and the DRC government record of human rights is poor, the issue is the sensitivity of the perception of a former colonial nation humiliating a democratically elected African leader. Adding fuel to the fire, the Belgian press actively reported numerous differences of opinion on Belgian/Congolese relations and the Congolese closed their consulate in Antwerp and recalled their ambassador from Brussels (although the closure and the recall may be for other, unrelated reasons). Although ordered to close their consulates in the DRC, the Belgians continue to work in their offices in Bukavu and Lubumbashi. Smets believes the issues will be settled given time and said Belgium will remain fully engaged in the DRC despite this crisis.

14. (C) Leterme did talk to Congolese PM Gizenga May 27 and continues to try to reach President Kabila by phone. According to Smets, Leterme's message points will include: asking the Congolese to postpone closing the Belgian consulates, stressing the importance to the Goma peace process of the consulate in Bukavu; asking if Kabila will receive the Belgian Ambassador to the DRC; and mentioning a plan to send a high level special envoy to Kinshasa to work out the problems. This message, Smets noted, adds to the sensitivities within the Belgian government since sending a special envoy would in effect be telling de Gucht he can no longer do the job there. There are also press stories Leterme has publicly distanced himself from de Gucht; Leterme reportedly called de Gucht twice to explain he really agrees with de Gucht's message.

15. (C) There is some concern de Gucht's statements will cause the Congo to turn away Belgian interests and favor more the Chinese for economic development. China is said to have given the Congo a USD 9 billion loan in return for access to important mining sites. Another version is the Chinese have a deal that, in exchange for 10 million tons of copper, they will build 3500 km. of roads and 3250 km of railways for the Congo. The market price of 10 million tons of copper is USD 70 billion and the estimated value of the new roads and railways is USD 6.5 billion. Kabila allegedly will get USD 500 million in kickbacks from the Chinese.

16. (C) Two legal cases in Belgium add new fodder for comment. The Congolese Interior Minister Kalume is involved in a court case in Belgium on money laundering practices. Recently a Belgian judge decided to freeze Kalume's (considerable) assets in Belgium. The second case involves the arrest of Congolese opposition leader Jean-Pierre Bemba on an ICC warrant (ref b). A Belgian judge ruled Bemba must be held in custody until his transfer to the Hague to face the ICC charges. His lawyer is appealing, asking for Bemba's release on bail. The Belgian authorities made the arrest after receiving information Bemba was about to leave Belgium. (NOTE: Bemba had also applied for a visa at the U.S. Embassy in Brussels. Lacking approval from the Department to issue the visa, the visa was not granted. END NOTE.)

17. (C) In an earlier meeting with visiting AF Office Director Karl Wycoff, Belgian MFA Africa hands stressed that, because of the many familial and historic ties between Belgium and the Congo, any mistake in Congo policy quickly becomes a domestic political issue in Belgium. There are many power centers in Belgium in the Congo debate -- the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, the President of the Parliament, the regional governments and (quietly) the monarchy itself. Also, although Belgium's economic interests in the Congo are much less than in the past, Belgium remains concerned that Congo's rich resources be used for the best interests of the Congo. Finally, Belgium feels strongly other countries in Europe and Africa continue to look to Belgium to take the lead in the Congo.

18. (C) Comment: The DRC is one of Belgium's top priority foreign policy concerns and the latest diplomatic flare-ups are provoking discussions on future involvement there. The DRC was a top item on the Council of Ministers agenda and will be a focus for future sessions. One goal of the April

trip was to present to the Congolese a unified Belgian government message; the recent dissension in Belgium makes it difficult for any Belgian message critical of the DRC government to be effective. The Belgians, from all indications, plan to remain engaged and to keep open the lines of communication with the Congolese government. The Belgians asked their Consul Generals to remain at their posts for now and have not recalled the Belgian ambassador. It will be a test of Leterme's diplomatic and political skills to deal with Kabila in such a way as to move forward their relations without damaging his domestic image and making the Congo even more of a football in Belgium's already difficult political debates. End Comment.